



# Middle East Studies

at Marine Corps University

6 November 2009

## INFORMATION PAPER

**Subject: Israeli Navy seizes arms shipment that originated in Iran and was destined for Syria.**

1. **Purpose:** To inform leadership of the significance and possible implications of the 4 November arms shipment seized by the Israeli Navy.
2. **Key Points:**
  - On 4 November 2009 Israeli commandos intercepted a ship, which was sailing under an Antiguan flag, near Cyprus, 100 miles west of the Israeli coast.
  - The shipment departed the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas and was transferred to the Antiguan flagged vessel Francop at the Egyptian Port of Damietta. The shipment was seized in route to the Syrian port of Latakia, where it is believed the arms would head by land to Hezbollah militants in Lebanon.
  - In 40 containers aboard the ship labeled "parts for bulldozers" Israeli commandos found an estimated 500 tons of Iranian-supplied weapons bound for Syria.
  - Among the weapons seized were missiles, rockets of various sizes, mortar rounds, hand grenades, ammunition for AK-47 rifles and anti-tank weapons.

### **Proof of Iranian Involvement**

- The arms were in containers that had Iranian shipping codes and were concealed among stacks of Iranian-made polyethylene plastics in containers labeled "IRISL: Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines."
- Documents showing the shipment originated in Iran were also found.
- Among the rockets found were thousands of shorter-range Katyusha rockets which Hezbollah has previously received from Iran and used in rocket attacks against Israel.
- No matter whom the end user was Iran is forbidden under a U.N. embargo to export any weapons or weapon material to anyone.

### **Hezbollah as an Iranian Proxy**

- Hezbollah was founded in 1982 with direct assistance from Iran and is an important Iranian instrument over which Tehran exerts significant influence.
- Iranian support for Hezbollah is at times both overt and covert.
- Iran supplies Hezbollah with arms, financing, personnel and training.
- Iran's support for Hezbollah has significantly increase over the past decade with the shipment of greater amounts and more sophisticated weapons, increased funding, and better training. This increased support was made very apparent during the 2006 fighting between Hezbollah and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).
- If Israel or the US were to conduct military operations against Iran's nuclear program, Iran would likely retaliate using Hezbollah to conduct attacks against Israel.



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## **Increasing Hezbollah reliance on Iranian support**

- Hezbollah's 2006 confrontation with IDF depleted Hezbollah's weapons caches, but with substantial Iranian assistance Hezbollah has been able to rearm and regroup.
  - The 2006 fighting has increased Hezbollah's dependence on Iran even further. Both Hezbollah's loss of weapons and trained fighters in the conflict as well as the resulting damage to its reputation and position in Lebanon has made it more reliant on Iranian support.

## **Other recent developments taken into account in bottom line assessment**

- Tehran divulged the existence of a previously secret nuclear facility near Qom, increasing suspicion and fears of Iran's nuclear intentions and capabilities.
- Nuclear negotiations between the UN P5+1 and Iran are currently being stalled by Tehran following a proposal by the P5+1 and by all indications will likely end without any agreement or any significant breakthrough in talks.
- On 3 November, U.S. and Israel completed joint ballistic missile defense exercised dubbed "Operation Juniper Cobra". This exercise has been largely viewed as a signal to Iran that the military option is still on the table should negotiations breakdown, and Israeli officials have continued to voice that they are becoming impatient and time is running out to act.
- The United States has decided to reinvestigate intelligence findings regarding Iran's nuclear program and any weapons dimensions and has also ordered new assessments of all aspects of Iran's nuclear and military capabilities.
- The United States and European Union have reached an agreement to utilize fuel sanctions against Iran should negotiations fail, but Russia is not likely to go along with these sanctions, making them ineffective.

## **3. Bottom Line:**

- Iran is increasing the frequency of shipments and the amount of arms being sent to Hezbollah. This increase coupled with the events unfolding in regards to Iran's nuclear program indicates that Iran is preparing for possible strikes against its nuclear facilities.
- This increase may also indicate that Tehran has made the decision that it will continue along its current path in regards to its nuclear programs, and that its counter proposal to the UN proposal is yet another attempt to appear as if it is willing to negotiate, while in reality it is stalling as it advances its nuclear progress and prepares for the possibility of a strike against its facilities.
- As a cautionary note, Hezbollah is not the only proxy that Iran supports both regionally or internationally. If Iran is arming Hezbollah in preparation for an attack by Israel or the United State it is likely that Iran is doing the same, through the Islamic Republic Guard Corps and Quds forces, for its other proxies in the region in order to carry out strikes against Western targets and their allies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, etc.

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